

Documenting refugee languages in the diaspora: The Boise Language Project



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Boise Language Project

- Started in Spring 2010
- Integrating teaching and learning, research, and community outreach
- Involves:
 - Student training in field methods
 - Documentation of refugee languages
 - Service to refugee communities



Refugee Resettlement

- “A person who **flees** from her/his home or country to seek refuge elsewhere as in a time of war, [or for fear of] political or religious persecution.” *—United Nations High Commission on Refugees*
 - **No choice** to return home or in resettlement location.
 - Different from migrants who **choose to move** in order to improve their future prospects.
 - Experience PTSD and other mental health issues.



Refugee Resettlement in the US

- Annually, fewer than 1/2 of 1% of the world's refugee population is admitted to the US.
- Refugees' living expenses are subsidized for their first 8 months* in the US.
 - Adults enroll in intensive English program with goal of language learning is employment
 - No incentive for continuing education or for pursuing higher education
 - Upon arrival, have 6 years to become citizens
- States manage refugee resettlement process.

Boise as Refugee Resettlement City

- Idaho became a resettlement state in 1975
- Located in Southwest Idaho (close to Utah and Oregon borders)
- 200,000 inhabitants in Boise, 80 square miles
- Predominantly Caucasian (89%)
- Refugee agencies are non-profit organizations



Refugees in Boise

- 1980's: Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe
- 1990's: Eastern Europe
- 2000's: Near East/South Asia (34%), Europe/Central Asia (29%), Africa (27%), East Asia (9%), Latin America/Caribbean (1%)

2000-2011 Language Demographics: Top 5 Languages

2000		2005		2011	
Serbo-Croatian	75%	Turkish	51%	Nepali	50%
Arabic	8%	Russian	31%	Karen	17%
Farsi/Dari	7%	Somali	8%	Arabic	15%
Ukranian	6%	Farsi/Dari	6%	Swahili	10%
French	4%	Maay	4%	Burmese	8%



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Languages Currently Spoken in Boise

- Acholi
- Albanian
- Amharic
- Arabic
- Armenian
- Azerbaijani
- Bajuni
- Bari
- Bembe
- Burmese
- Chaldean-Assyrian
- Chin
- Dinka
- English
- Ewe
- Farsi/Dari
- Foor
- French
- Fur
- Gio
- Grebo
- Greek
- Hausa
- Hindi
- Ishan/Esan
- Karen
- Kayah
- Kazakh
- Kiganda
- Kikongo
- Kikuyu
- Kinyamulange
- Kinyarwanda
- Kirundi
- Kivira
- Kizigua
- Krahn
- Krio
- Kunama
- Kurdish
- Kyrgyz
- Lingala
- Mai
- Mandeian
- Masalit
- Nepali
- Nuba
- Oromo
- Pashei
- Pashtu
- Romany
- Russian
- Sango
- Serbo Croatian
- Siryac
- Somali
- Spanish
- Sudanese
- Swahili
- Tajiki
- Tera
- Thai
- Tigrinya
- Turkish
- Uduk
- Ukrainian
- Urdu
- Uzbek
- Vietnamese
- Zaghawa

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Languages Currently Spoken in Boise



About Boise State University

- More than 22,000 students
 - Mostly undergraduate
 - Several Master's programs, few Ph.D. programs
- Most students are from Idaho
- Average undergraduate age = 26
- Traditionally teaching institution, with recent push for focus on research

Linguistics at Boise State

- Undergraduate emphasis in English major
- ~ 70 students (Spring 2013)
- Current curriculum requires all students to enroll in field methods course as capstone
- Heavy emphasis on Service-Learning throughout the curriculum – mostly involving the refugee population



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The Boise Language Project (BLP)

Boise Language Project

- Started Spring 2010 with first Field Methods course offering
 - Wanted to work on language spoken by refugees
 - Reached out to different African communities
 - Ended up with Uzbek student consultant, not refugee
- Made connections with African refugee communities through collaboration with School of Nursing later in Spring 2010.

Goals of the BLP

- Involve members of the **Boise refugee community**
 - Explain importance of language documentation
 - Train speakers to document languages
 - Instill sense of self-worth and confidence, as well as pride in their heritage and their native tongue
 - Encourage younger generation to seek higher education
- Train **linguistics students** in language documentation and field methods.

Summary of BLP Activities since 2010

- Spring 2011 – Began **Chizigula** documentation
 - Service project on Zigua farm
 - Working on dictionary (over 5,800 entries)
- Spring 2012 – Began **Maay** documentation
 - Service project includes compiling a bilingual Maay/English children's story book
- Spring 2013 – Began **Bembe** documentation
 - Service project will train speakers to create talking dictionary

Documentation Process

- Each language begins as project for the field methods course
- Once the semester is over, the consultant and community members are asked to set future goals
 - Continue working on traditional documentation
 - Work on specific project for community



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The Student Experience

- 49 students have participated in the program since Spring 2010
- Students learn about refugee issues in addition to language documentation and field methods
- Students present course findings at Undergraduate Research Conference

Steps for Recruitment

- In cases where the community is organized:
 - Meet with community leadership to discuss language and consultant selection
 - Assess needs in community
 - Meet with community members
 - Meet with language consultant(s) to explain process
- If no organized association, arrange meeting with several members of speech community

Additional Recruitment: Idaho Conference on Refugees

- Annual conference in Boise
 - Workshops for service providing agencies (educational, health, mental health)
 - Workshops for refugees
- Presented workshops in 2012 and 2013
 - Faculty present information about documentation
 - Consultants speak about their experiences
 - Students conduct mini elicitation sessions

Off-Campus Collaborations

- English Language Center
 - Help with training materials for volunteers working with refugees in language learning
- Idaho Office of Refugees
 - Finding resources for service providers about language-related issues
 - Dictionaries for most commonly spoken languages

On-Campus Collaborations

- School of Nursing
 - Study on African refugees' perceived health
- Music Department
 - Documentation of folklore and music
- Campus Refugee Interest Group (MSG-MOA)
 - Best practices for documenting oral histories
- Refugee Studies Minor
- Mobile Learning Initiative



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MAHALO!